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FULFILLING THE LAW AND THE PROPHETS.

THE gospel of Jesus introduced a new dispensation which superseded the dispensation of the Law. This was one of the *RELATION OF THE GOSPEL TO THE LAW* greatest transitions, or even the greatest transition, in the historical period of the race. To effect this transition was the supreme task of Christ, and no other than he could have accomplished it. The difficulties of making clear to men the higher ideas which the gospel brought, and of carrying men over from a legalistic life to a life of spiritual freedom, were very great. How great, appears from the gospel accounts of Jesus' ministry. The legalistic beliefs and practices of the Jews among whom he lived and worked were a constant obstruction to his teaching. Yet he proceeded with patience and wisdom to set forth the gospel truths, and to lead men step by step into an understanding and acceptance of them. His methods in accomplishing this were various, as his hearers were various and the circumstances of his ministry. Jesus repeatedly and in many ways explained to them his attitude toward the Old Testament, and what he taught regarding the old dispensation was constantly illustrated to them and impressed upon them by his own example.

That he did not regard the Old Testament in the same way as other Jews of his day was apparent to everyone from the first. *JESUS' ATTITUDE TOWARD THE OLD TESTAMENT* He made no secret of this fact; and it became very soon a charge against him on the part of the scribes and Pharisees that he repudiated the law and the prophets. The charge was a false one, but there were not a few

things in his words and in his conduct which gave color to it. Nor have scholars yet been able to agree altogether as to what precisely was Jesus' attitude toward the Old Testament. But the gospels put the matter, at least in a general way, in a clear light. Jesus did not feel himself bound to observe the precepts of the Old Testament law as though he were subject to the system; he did not limit or confine his teaching to the teaching of the Old Testament; and he felt himself free to supersede the Old Testament law and teaching by his own. In other words, he set himself above the Old Testament.

In doing this he established the gospel dispensation as superior to, and as successor to, the legal dispensation. This did not mean, however, that he threw aside or broke with the Old Testament. He did neither of these things. He regarded the Old Testament history as that of a chosen people, and as filled with the presence and purpose of God. Only, the Hebrew people, even at their best, had not reached the highest ideal of God, and consequently there was room for progress. There was needed at the right time—and it was at the right time that Jesus came—a higher dispensation to carry the chosen people forward toward the divine ideal. Jesus gave a gospel which was superior to the religion of the Old Testament, not because the religion of the Old Testament was not good, but because the Gospel was better.

But the greatest opposition which Jesus had to meet was aroused by his conflict with existing Jewish legalism. It was *PERVRSITIES OF FIRST-CENTURY JUDAISM* not the Old Testament standard of life which he found in Judea, but an interpretation of the Old Testament standard which was in many ways perverse. The elaboration and externalization of the law, which had been going on for several generations, had placed Judaism in a position far inferior to the best conceptions of the Old Testament. In three respects this perversity of first-century Judaism may be described: (1) it largely ignored the prophetic portion of the Old Testament, which was the very soul of the Hebrew history and Bible; (2) it exalted legalism until Judaism had

become a system of precepts for the performance of an innumerable series of great and small duties, which few could know and none could fully obey; (3) it so externalized the law that religion came to consist chiefly in the observance of minute ceremonial observances, while the internal, spontaneous, and genuinely spiritual elements of the law were neglected or ignored.

In resisting strenuously this type of Judaism, Jesus was by no means opposing the Old Testament—rather he was defending it against false interpretations which had become current. Nevertheless, and quite naturally, the Jewish leaders identified their conception of the Old Testament with the Old Testament itself—how could their ideas and their interpretation of the Bible be defective! And so they held him to be a traitor to the religion, the history, and the literature of the nation. He was guilty of blasphemy, they said; and the blasphemer must by the law be put to death. And they saw to it that he was put to death.

In the Sermon on the Mount, when Jesus is presenting with especial fulness his idea of the true righteousness, he carefully explains the relation which he understands to
NOT TO DESTROY, BUT TO FULFIL exist between the Old Testament and himself. He states this relation in the simple but comprehensive words recorded in Matt. 5:17: "Think not that I came to destroy the law or the prophets: I came not to destroy, but to fulfil." His gospel was a fuller revelation of God's character and will. God's will and character had been made known to men in the centuries of Hebrew history, but now they were to be more fully made known, perfectly revealed. The high ideal of life which had found embodiment in the Hebrew Bible was to be exalted to the highest ideal. He did not set the seal of absolute duty and truth upon all that the lawgivers and prophets had taught, but he took up and affirmed the essential ethical principles and religious ideas which the Hebrew lawgivers had endeavored to formulate and the Hebrew prophets had endeavored to instil into the lives of men. He left no doubt that his own revelation of God far surpassed the previous reve-

lations to the chosen people; for example, he said: "Verily I say unto you, among them that are born of women there hath not arisen a greater than John the Baptist; yet he that is but little in the kingdom of heaven, is greater than he" (Matt. 11:11). To the same effect was his teaching regarding the new cloth and the new wine (Mark 2:21, 22).

When therefore Jesus says, "I came not to destroy, but to fulfil," he places in our hands the key to his relation to the Old Testament, and bids us see the continuity of God's purpose among men, the eternity of right and truth, and the absolute certainty that the divine ideal is to develop and triumph in the world.

It is plain, then, what Jesus meant by "fulfilling" the law and the prophets. He did not mean that he would secure the literal accomplishment of everything hoped and promised in the Old Testament, as though the Old Testament simply presented the program which it was his mission to carry out. Nor did he mean that he would secure the complete literal observance and performance of all that is commanded in the law and the prophets. What he did mean was that he came to introduce and to establish the highest ideal of truth and life toward which the law and the prophets had led the way.

This was his mission. And he thought himself competent to perform this mighty work, this manifestation of God to men, because he knew himself to be chosen by God and qualified by him for the conveyance of this supreme revelation. Since he was superior to all previous revealers of God, he was able to pass judgment upon their teachings; he was appointed to pronounce what elements in those teachings were of permanent and what of transient value. He came to unify, to perfect, and to establish the whole sum of religious and ethical ideals among men; and for this service he needed no external criterion, since he had the divine ideal within himself.

*HOW JESUS
FULFILLED THE
LAW AND THE
PROPHETS*